

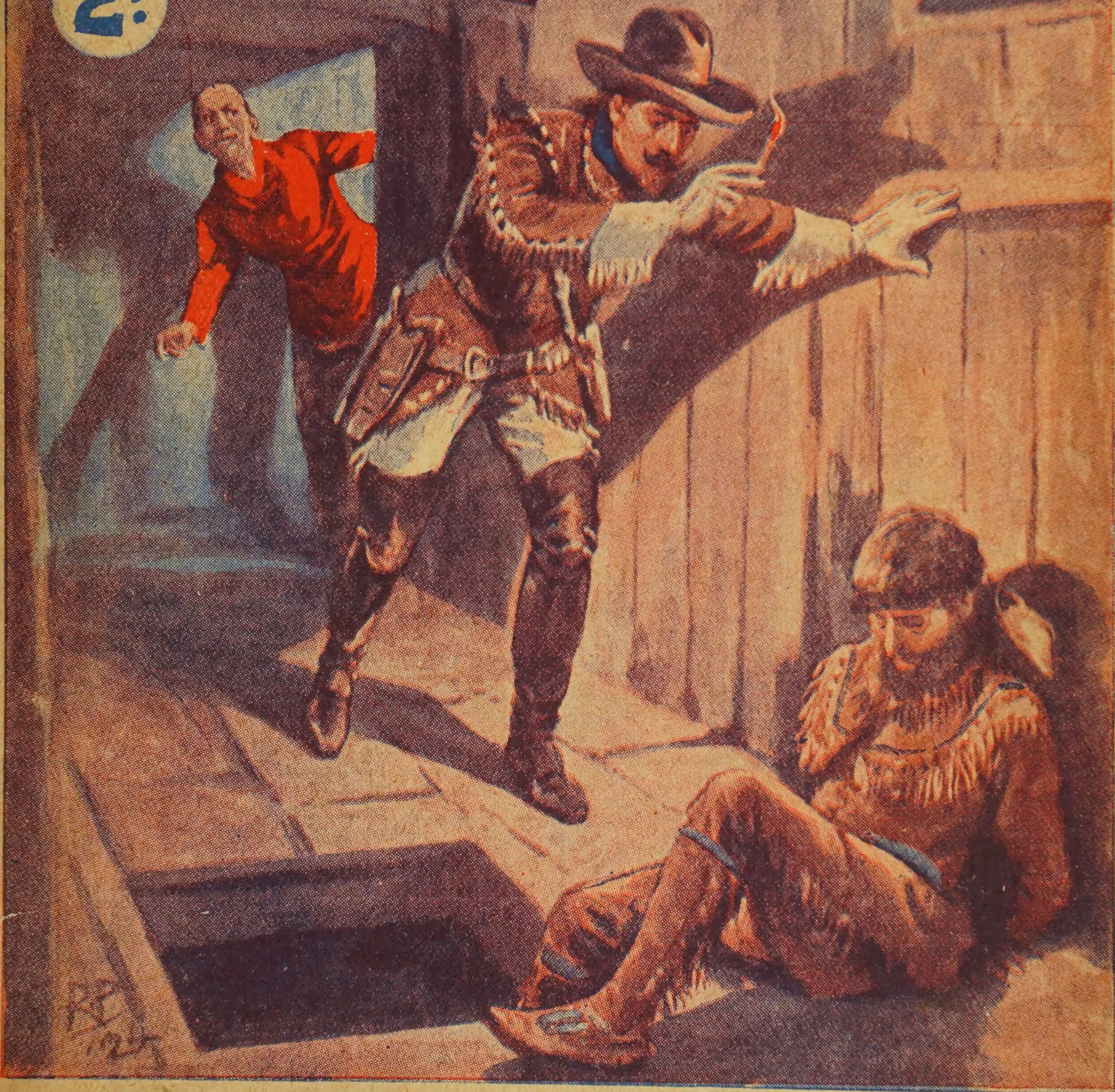
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(Aldine Series)

BUFFALO BILL
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2^d

THE CONVICT MARAUDERS



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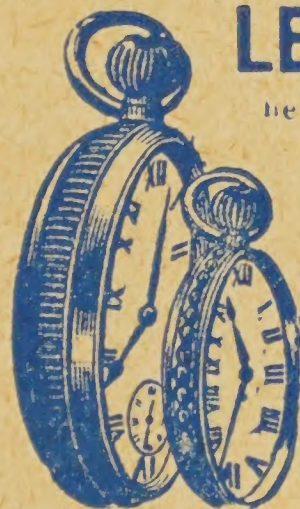
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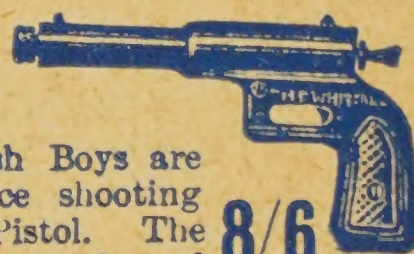
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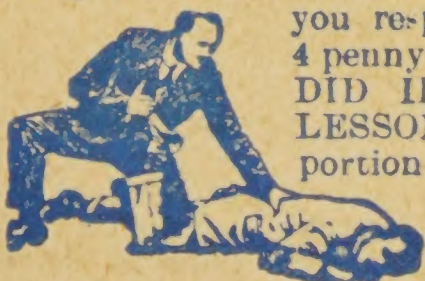


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The Convict Marauders.

Buffalo Bill's Startling Adventures on a Lone Trail.

CHAPTER 1.

The Gila Red Masks. — "Number Fifty-four." — In the "Inferno" Saloon.

"My dear Cody, this state of things can't go on for ever; the place is terrorised—there's no other word for it—terrorised by these ruffians who call themselves the Gila Red Masks."

The white-haired colonel of the 5th Cavalry Regiment leaned back in his chair and glanced up at the alert, erect figure of Buffalo Bill, who regarded his vis-à-vis with a smile.

"This, then, is the reason for my urgent call to old Fort Phoenix, colonel?"

Colonel McPhater nodded.

"You see," the commandant explained, "these outlaws have got somewhat beyond us. They are at the bottom of this incessant trouble with the redskins, and until they are run to earth we may reckon to have the Comanches on the war-path. I believe, nay, I am positive, that you are the only man to set things right. I said as much in my last report, and the authorities have evidently come round to the same opinion or you would not be here. I am ready to do anything to assist you. The whole regiment is at your disposal, if need be."

"Thank you, colonel; but I won't take you at your word. It seems to me this business will be best put through single-handed," was the quick response.

The colonel started visibly.

"You don't mean that you are going to track these rascals down alone?" he questioned.

"I do; it's risky, maybe, but it's the surer way."

"I won't dispute that point. I've tried and failed; it's now the turn of a younger and cleverer man."

There was no trace of bitterness, only a sense of disappointment in the colonel's remark. A soldier of the old school, he had the courage if not the skill of the famous Chief of Scouts.

The outlaw band, known as the Gila Red Masks, had, in the words of Colonel McPhater, "terrorised" every decent settler in those parts. Almost every conceivable atrocity could be laid to their charge. They had "held up" Silver City again and again, until the once thriving mining centre had been reduced to but a shadow of its former self, and they were responsible for the turbulence of the Indians. Never, even in the old fighting days, had the Comanches given more trouble, or been more persistently hostile to peaceful whites.

All this, and much more, Buffalo Bill learned from the fort commandant. Two troops of cavalry under Captain Edgemount had been posted twenty miles up the valley, while another troop was acting along the base of the foothills; a fourth the colonel had despatched in a southerly direction across the plain. His idea was to keep the reds engaged whilst Buffalo Bill, with the bulk of the force at his disposal, worked round into their hunting-grounds and destroyed their village, at the same time trapping the bandits in their own fastness.

The scout shook his head decisively when Colonel McPhater unfolded his plans.

"Call your men in, colonel. Keep

THE CONVICT MARAUDERS.

Silver City well protected and leave me unhampered. I can do nothing until I have taken a thorough scout round," he said.

"But that means time."

"You will gain by it in the end."

"Well, Cody, I am content to leave the matter entirely with you. Do as you will, only don't fail."

"That's precisely what I don't intend to do. Good-bye, colonel; I may, or may not, be absent for some weeks. I'll fix these beauties up, but the plan needs working up. You'll find me in Silver City for a few days at any rate. If you want me send an orderly to the 'Inferno.'"

"What! that gambling-hell?—the worst saloon in the whole place!" cried the colonel, aghast at the very idea.

"Exactly; and on that account the very best place to begin my lone trail. By the way, I passed a very suspicious-looking customer a short distance from the fort. I came upon him unawares, and by the way he started and made himself scarce I judged him to be a 'wanted' man."

The colonel sprang to his feet, with an ashen face.

"Tell me," he demanded, hoarsely, "what was he like?"

"A stunted, yellow-skinned, black-haired, little villain, with the most brilliant pair of eyes I have ever seen in a two-legged being. Eh! What's wrong, colonel?"

The commandant had staggered back some paces, and stood leaning against the table, gasping, his lips moving, but articulating no sound. At last, by an effort, he controlled himself and spoke.

"Cody, you have seen him—that man; he is known as 'Number Fifty-four,' an escaped convict, and the author of all our trouble. A meeting occurred amongst a batch of gaol-birds some time ago, and a lot led by this 'Fifty-four' managed to escape from the prison. These scoundrels are, I am sure, those who now go by the name of the Gila Red Masks."

* * * * *

Silver City presented its very worst features to a newcomer after night-

fall, and when Buffalo Bill, following his interview with the commandant, rode into the township he speedily became acquainted with one of them.

Halfway up the main street, where the darkness went unrelieved by a single gleam of light from either door or window, came of a sudden the flash of firearms, the sharp, ringing report of a "six-shooter," followed instantly by a volley of blasphemy and the sounds of a desperate scuffle. The noise was sufficient to cover Buffalo Bill's approach, for he galloped up undetected by the struggling band of half a dozen men, who were in the act of overpowering their victim.

"Stand back, there! Fair play, you blackguards!" cried he, riding in upon the miscreants like an avalanche and scattering them to the right and left, whilst their victim remained gasping upon the ground.

Half-smothered oaths and one or two yells of pain greeted Cody's appearance.

"Let drive, yew darned coyotes! Hyer's some new pilgrim. Let's fix him up!" broke from one of the discomfited crowd.

Instantly two revolvers barked, but Buffalo Bill had prepared for this kind of reception. Marking one of his assailants by the flash of the latter's firearm, he, too, pulled, and the succeeding scream told that his shot had not failed like the others.

Again he fired, and again a yell of pain greeted the performance. The marvellous precision of his aim had a striking effect upon the marauders. They scrambled up and made off as quickly as their legs could carry them, leaving Buffalo Bill to look after the man they had attacked, and to succour, if he felt so inclined, their wounded comrades. He turned his first attention to the victim, who was slowly scrambling to his feet. In the darkness it was difficult to distinguish the features of the man, but, by the cut of his clothes, Buffalo Bill concluded he was a hunter.

"Waal, boss, I owes yer a powerful load o' thanks fer comin' in 'twixt me and them varmints. It ain't none o' their faults ef I ain't scalped. Say,

I've heerd this yere's a hard township, but durn me ef I reckoned on bein' held up the first time I drags my moccasins inside o' it. What with Injuns on ther rampage and them durned Gila Red Masks things air getting jest lively."

It was on the tip of the scout's tongue to put some questions, but he hesitated. The two wounded desperadoes, if they were members of that notorious and mysterious band, might learn more than he cared for them to know at the outset.

"I guess we'll give these rascals an opportunity to speak for themselves," he said, bending over one of the men who lay groaning on the ground.

"Blame yer, Buffler! I knows yer lip," snarled the rogue, "and I guess I kin fix up yer object in smelling round Silver City. Yew ain't going ter succeed, and the whole durned crowd at Fort Phoenix kin bet on it. Ef yer ever comes slap against daylight ag'in yer kin count it a miracle. That's flat."

The wretch interspersed his remarks with a torrent of blasphemy, notwithstanding the fact that his life was quickly ebbing to a close. He had been shot in the chest, and blood was flowing freely from the wound. By this time a small crowd, composed, for the most part, of negroes, half-breeds, and Mexicans, with a sprinkling of toughs of the Western American type, had gathered round the scout and the hunter whom he had saved. One or two had provided themselves with lanterns, and as the light streamed down upon the face of the dying ruffian one of the newcomers darted forward with a cry of malicious triumph.

"The Lord Boss, he's down, boys!" he cried, in a voice which plainly told that, so far as he was concerned, the other's extremity was a matter for relief. "The dirty, sneaking villain! I guess, stranger pard, yer hes rid this township of the meanest critter thet ever drewed a gun."

Buffalo Bill recoiled from the speaker with an instinctive feeling of dislike. The man possessed a shrunken, mahogany-tanned visage, with

accompanying high cheek bones, prominently-ridged eyebrows, a conical head, disfigured by a large scar, showing that at some period or other of his history he had been scalped alive by Indians. A fringe of nondescript hair surrounded the scar, and fell in wisps over a dirty red neckcloth.

His large square jaws were curiously out of proportion to the rest of the face, the mouth being thin and cruel, and partly hidden by short bristles of red hair. But the man's eyes were at once the most striking and repulsive feature of his physiognomy. Small and curiously contracted, there was something almost feline about them. Heavy, fleshy lids, devoid of lashes, doubled over and drawn tight at both corners, formed an ample shade, if such were needed, to eyes so deeply set as his.

Buffalo Bill read the man at a glance. "Villain" was written plain in every lineament of his evil face. Though the scout did not know it then, this was Cat-Eyed Jim, called so because of his supposed ability to see in the dark. He ran the Inferno Saloon, a veritable gambling "hell."

The effect of his speech upon the dying miscreant was electrical. The latter made a frantic effort to speak, an effort that cost him his remaining strength. A look of diabolical malignity overspread his face, rendered more awful by his dying and ineffectual struggles to articulate a word.

The crowd, fast increasing in size, began to jeer at the poor wretch, who made one last but futile effort to express his baffled rage. A hoarse scream burst from his throat, and was greeted by a derisive yell from the bystanders. Sickened by their brutality, Buffalo Bill turned aside. It occurred to him to look for the second desperado, who had remained so still as to furnish the impression that he had been killed outright. Not a little to his surprise, he found the body gone.

The same thing evidently puzzled the rescued hunter, for he regarded the scout with a look of mingled awe and horror.

"Durn me ef there warn't two o' these skunks floored, an' I asks where's t'other?" he exclaimed.

The proprietor of the "Inferno" faced about with a start.

"Who fixes up this yere deal, Ba'r Hunter?" he demanded.

"Dunno."

"Waal, sonny, I guess this township ain't calkulating ter put ther Lord Boss under dirt fer love. Spot cash ar' our motter. Mebbe, this yere stranger boss kin let fly ther chips?"

He spoke with an ugly grin, whilst at the same time he cast a stealthy, sidelong glance at Buffalo Bill, who now faced him.

"Possibly you have heard of me," he observed; "and if so you will be under no misapprehension concerning this affair. I am William Cody, Chief of Scouts."

"Buffler Bill, ther red varmints' terror!" gasped Cat-Eyed Jim, surprised and startled, in spite of himself.

"The same; and my business here is to ferret out a gang of cutthroats who call themselves the Gila Red Masks. Let there be no mistake; any of you who may have dealings with that gang had better drop them or make tracks out of Silver City sharp. It's my business to fix them up, and fix them up I guess I shall!"

Buffalo Bill, who knew instinctively how to adapt himself to circumstances, divined in the present instance that he would have less trouble subsequently by taking the bull by the horns at once and letting it be known who he was, as well as the nature of his errand. His boldness in proclaiming these items fairly staggered the crowd in general, and Cat-Eyed Jim in particular.

"I guess you and I can strike a deal," Buffalo Bill went on. "I've taken a fancy to fix up at your shanty; so lead the way, and get this man whom you call the Lord Boss decently buried before daybreak."

"Guess you pulled on him too quick, boss scout; fer he'd hev been a sight o' use ter yer. He were a spy o' ther Gila Red Masks," observed Cat-Eyed Jim confidentially.

"Never mind; I reckon there are

others, and they'll come in just as handy," was the seemingly careless rejoinder.

Cat-Eyed Jim regarded the scout with another sidelong glance. It began to dawn upon the saloon-keeper that in Cody he had encountered his match.

The man whose life Buffalo Bill had saved proved to be a trapper who had passed more than thirty years in the district, but had not before ventured so far south as Silver City. Most of his time had been spent north of the Gila Valley, but the hostility of the Comanche Indians had driven him south. With a small fortune in dollar notes he had decided to make Silver City his headquarters; for there, at least, he was known by many amongst its shifting population. Cat-Eyed Jim had recognised him at once, a recognition that was mutual, for the two had met before when the saloon-keeper owed his life to the skill of the trapper.

Known as Bear Hunter, he was deemed by many to be more intimately connected with the Indians than with the people of his own colour. Consequently speculation was rife when the news spread through the township—as it soon did—that characters of such note as Buffalo Bill and Bear Hunter, the Gila Valley trapper, had "come in."

The trapper, like most of his class, relied almost exclusively upon his rifle, and affected a contempt for weapons of smaller calibre; nor did he attach the same importance to horseflesh as did Buffalo Bill. He had entered Silver City afoot. Notwithstanding, it fell to his share to look after Buffalo Bill's fiery little mustang when the scout, following Cat-Eyed Jim, crossed the threshold of the Inferno Saloon—the ill-omened gambling-hell he had elected to make his headquarters.

Even Buffalo Bill was surprised at the villainous aspect of the place, though he took care not to display his feelings, either by word or sign. The saloon must at one time have been an unpretentious log shanty, but additions of adobe had taken away whatever symmetry the place then pos-

sessed. Stepping through a low-pitched but wide door, he entered a long room lighted with ill-smelling oil-lamps hanging from the ceiling, and tallow candles fixed into the necks of empty bottles on the several rough tables.

At the extreme end of the room stood the bar, where a couple of negroes were passing drinks to a noisy group of Spanish Mexicans. Behind the bar the eye could travel no further, for the room beyond was partitioned off by a fantastic curtain composed of bearskins and greasy blankets. Still, judging by the sharp incline of the ceiling hard by, Buffalo Bill concluded that the space behind was inconsiderable. It needed both a quick and practised eye to note these particulars at a glance when more than two score fierce and suspicious optics were turned upon the intruder.

The silence was absolute when Cat-Eyed Jim announced Buffalo Bill. A moment later it was broken by one of the crowd jumping to his feet.

"This ain't the military depot, pard scout," he growled, "and I guess we all object on principle to one o' them cussed Fort Phoenix spies a-nosin' round this wicky-up. Say, now, I goes nap on this yere deal. There's the door! Waal, scoot!"

There was no mistaking the big ruffian's meaning, for as he spoke he covered Buffalo Bill with his revolver. Cat-Eyed Jim started back, feigning concern, but in reality to give others in the vicinity an opportunity to also cover the scout.

The manoeuvre was patent to Buffalo Bill, but he felt it prudent to feign ignorance. To draw his own six-shooter would have meant precipitating his fate, for it was clear that his assailant was in grim earnest.

Few men could have faced the situation as he did and fewer still could have awed the crowd and his assailant in particular as he quickly proceeded to do. Facing the man who held him covered, he slowly and deliberately pulled out his bowie-knife.

The crowd gathered round, mystified and curious, for by this time fully a dozen weapons were levelled at the

plucky scout's heart. A single movement of his hand to the butt-end of his revolver would be followed by the instant discharge of those dozen weapons. His life hung upon the slenderest thread.

"Scoot, boss scout, or I'll plug yew with a dose o' lead. I gives yer ten seconds ter make up yer mind. One—two——"

The ruffian got no further. All at once he became alive to the powerful influence of two steely eyes. The word "three" trembled on his lips, but a will more powerful than his own kept its utterance back.

Buffalo Bill was fighting for his life, and he had adopted a method which had served him on previous occasions in good stead. To the burly ruffian the eyes of the scout grew brighter and seemed to scintillate. Their effect upon him was curious. Cold chills rippled down his back, a numbed feeling crept into his arms, and his hand holding the revolver trembled. He was conscious of a singular collapse of nerve, together with a lack of resolution, which puzzled and finally awed him.

At this stage he heard the scout's voice.

"Drop that gun, you scoundrel! or, by the eternal powers, I'll put this bowie through you!"

The bystanders, and amongst them those who also held the scout covered, never forgot in after life the expression of his eyes at that moment. The predominant impression made upon them was the certainty of the threat being fulfilled, and apparently the same conviction impressed itself ere long upon his particular assailant.

During two or three seconds the latter's gaze met that of Buffalo Bill. He was the weaker, and he quailed. With a muttered curse he staggered back and let his six-shooter drop. Like a flash Buffalo Bill slipped the knife back into his belt, and seizing his brace of six-shooters, wheeled round upon the awed ruffians. They, however, needed no urging to put up their own weapons. Shrinking back like whipped curs, they anxiously put their revolvers out of sight.

THE CONVICT MARAUDERS.

Cat-Eyed Jim felt thankful that he had not ostensibly sided with the crowd, but at the same time he cast about in his own mind for surer means of being rid of such a dangerous foe as Buffalo Bill had proved to be.

That the scout would sooner or later discover his own connection with the Red Masks, he was under no misapprehension. So long as he tarried in the saloon his danger was paramount.

"Pard Buffler," he sang out, "after this yere fool-play, I stands drinks all round jest ter show this Silver City crowd there ain't no ill-will 'twixt me an' yew, nor yit ag'inst B'ar Hunter. Hyer ar' ther trappers, boyees," he added, as the object of his remark ambled into the saloon, "an' I reckon I'll kind o' make it plain oncet as how this hyer pair o' pilgrims air free ter come an' go, barrin' none. Ef any one o' this crowd object, let him show his scalp, an' I gives Buffler Bill permission ter make mincemeat o' him."

He spoke with much gusto, and the crowd, quick to take the cue, broke in with a hoarse yell of applause, which, uttered in a variety of tongues, made a hideous babel. Under cover of the noise Buffalo Bill found opportunity to acquaint the trapper with what had occurred.

"Keep an eye on that rascal yonder," he whispered, indicating the crestfallen rogue who had first assailed him, and who was making an attempt to recover the weapon he had dropped.

A few rapid strides took Buffalo Bill to the spot where the revolver was lying. As he advanced the other retreated. He picked the weapon up, and was about to hand it to the trapper, when his glance fastened upon three roughly-scrawled initials upon the barrel. They formed the letters "G. R. M."

What did it mean?

The solution of the mystery was at hand. Bear Hunter had noticed the initials, too, and bending forward he whispered:

"I guess, pard, yew hes 'pulled' on ther boss o' ther Gila Red Masks. I knows ther varmint. They calls him Ben Lock."

"Who?" interposed Buffalo Bill sharply.

"Thet same varmint what held you up."

The scout's first thought was to take fresh stock of his late assailant, but when he looked round the ruffian had disappeared. Apparently he had deemed it prudent to make himself scarce, for a rapid survey of the room failed to elicit his whereabouts. This, however, was scarcely surprising, seeing that quite three-parts of the crowd had moved to the bar, and were jostling each other in their eagerness to partake of Cat-Eyed Jim's unusual hospitality.

The scout and the trapper made for an unoccupied table in a darkened corner of the saloon, where they might scrutinise their surroundings without being too plainly scrutinised in turn. Here and there a negro, grotesquely attired in a "boiled" shirt, passed to and fro amongst the gamblers, supplying cards and drink to the several groups in turn.

"I guess this shebang ain't mis-called, anyhow," was the trapper's comment; "fer ef this yere saloon ain't a pure, unadulterated gambling-hell, I wants ter know what is!"

"It's something more, I fancy—Hallo! what's wrong down by the bar?" exclaimed Buffalo Bill.

A wild yell had broken from the crowd—an unmistakable yell of terror—attended by an amazing melting away from the bar. The rush for the door was nothing short of a stampede. Mexicans, Spaniards, half-breeds, negroes, Ute Indians, miners, desperadoes, and Yankee toughs of every description rushed, panic-stricken, over tables and chairs, overturning some in their frantic efforts to reach the door.

A rapid fusillade of shots sped after them. The uproar was deafening, but above the yells and curses of the crowd could be heard occasionally an uncanny, croaking sound.

The panic-stricken saloon patrons seemed to vanish in a cloud of dust and revolver-smoke, and some moments passed ere Buffalo Bill and his companion were able to comprehend

the situation. Gradually, as the cloud thinned, they were able to make out the small figure of a Chinaman moving stealthily yet rapidly from table to table, gathering a golden spoil—the stakes of the gamblers.

Buffalo Bill covered the strange-looking object with one of his revolvers, but before he could pull the trigger grasped his arm.

"For the love o' Heaven, pard, ef yer means ter die a nat'ral death, don't fire!" he gasped.

The advice, though well meant, came too late. Buffalo Bill meant to bring the fellow down. A well-directed shot issued from his revolver, when, to his amazement, the Chinaman seemed to melt away into thin air before his very eyes.

A moment later the uncanny, croaking sound again became audible. This time it seemed to proceed from the vicinity of the door. Glancing sharply in that direction, Buffalo Bill fancied he could detect the flutter of a dark, loose garb as its wearer disappeared.

Non-plussed, he turned to where Bear Hunter crouched in evident terror against the wall!

"Come, be a man!" he observed sharply. "Are you, too, frightened by the tricks of a cowardly yellowskin?"

"It ain't that, Buffler," said the trapper hoarsely. "I ain't afeared o' nuthin' mortal. But thet yaller-belly ain't nuthin' nat'ral. He's Fing Fow, ther white and red man's curse. An' yew drawed on him! I reckons me an' yew kin pass in our checks, sart'in sure!"

CHAPTER 2.

The Midnight Assassin. — Fing Fow's Strategy. — Buffalo Bill Baffled.

BUFFALO BILL pricked up his ears at the mention of that name. "Fing Fow, the Assassin!" "Fing Fow, the Demon Chinese!"—these and many other appellations had been given to the mysterious being who terrorised white and red men alike in that territory.

Buffalo Bill had little difficulty in

recalling to mind the appearance of some of the actors in the recent panic. Cat-Eyed Jim and Ben Lock—whom the trapper called the chief of the Red Masks—had been in an appalling condition of funk, showing that neither of them was prepared to face the uncanny miscreant. His sudden appearance had evidently taken all by surprise.

However, before Buffalo Bill had quite decided whether to quit the saloon or explore further, some of the bolder spirits amongst the crowd peered cautiously in.

Finding the saloon to all intents deserted, they began to venture inside. Then for the first time they beheld Buffalo Bill and his companion. That the two had remained behind and survived the ordeal filled them with wonder, and contributed not a little to place the scout and the trapper upon a better footing with them.

It did more, for it made Cat-Eyed Jim positively servile and ready to accommodate himself to every wish of his new guests.

Acting upon Bear Hunter's suggestion, Buffalo Bill said nothing of his attempt to shoot the marauder, but he took the first opportunity to retire with his companion for the night.

The sleeping accommodation at the Inferno Saloon was primitive in the extreme. A couple of straw beds and a pair of army blankets were the most that Cat-Eyed Jim could supply, but since neither of his guests expected luxuries, they were not much troubled by the lack of comforts displayed.

Their apartment was directly under the shingled roof of the original portion of the saloon, and was bounded on three sides by the roughly-plastered log walls; the fourth side had been partitioned off by cross-beams. A guttering tallow candle jammed into the broken neck of a whisky bottle served to light these none too spacious quarters, shut off from the lower portion of the saloon by an iron-bound trap-door.

Having examined the barred-off passage and noticed that it was used as a store-place, Buffalo Bill rolled himself up in his rug and followed the trapper's example by falling asleep.

Presently the candle spluttered and went out, the noise below became less and less audible, and finally ceased.

The trapper stirred uncomfortably, and the sound roused Buffalo Bill, whose right hand instinctively grasped one of the revolvers in his belt. It was well that he adopted this precaution. Some moments later he detected a faint, rustling sound, almost too faint to set down as being anywhere in the vicinity. He was about to close his eyes when, through the darkness, he fancied he saw the movement of a darker object.

It was but momentary, but he had seen enough to feel sure that someone was hard by. Deeming a silent yet watchful attitude the best, he kept his eyes fixed where he had last detected the moving object. Every muscle and every nerve was tense; the very slightest sound, he knew, would be audible; and yet, to his surprise, he neither perceived nor heard anything. Silence was absolute.

It was almost with a sigh of relief that he heard the trapper roll heavily to one side, but an instant later the latter sprang up with a howl of pain and terror. Simultaneously the horrible and mysterious croaking sound which he had heard first in the saloon assailed his ears.

With lightning speed Buffalo Bill drew his revolver and fired. The momentary flash of fire outlined distinctly the figure of the horrible Chinaman. In considerably less time than it takes to relate, the scout was upon his feet. He would have given instant chase, but he was held back by the trapper's appealing tones.

"Help, Pard Buffler! I'm dying!" groaned Bear Hunter.

A light was absolutely essential. Again Cody was equal to the occasion. With flint and tinder he was able to light a taper which he luckily possessed.

An appalling sight met his gaze. The trapper was lying with his head propped up against the wall, whilst blood was streaming from a ghastly wound in his side. The death-rattle had begun to sound in his throat when Buffalo Bill knelt by him.

"Take my chips, Buffler, and leave this cursed hole. I'm going out with the night," gasped the dying man faintly.

As he spoke his head slipped from its support. The death-rattle grew louder and louder. He tried to speak; but further utterance was denied him. The end came with merciful swiftness.

Buffalo Bill got up, and for a moment scanned the apartment. Then he walked forward and found himself standing on the verge of the open trap-door. He had closed it before retiring!

Instantly he had decided on a plan. There was something tangible there: clearly the marauder was a thing of flesh and blood, and as such could only be dealt with by following up without a moment's delay.

A few swift steps backward took Cody once more to the side of the ill-fated trapper. If robbery had been the motive, the miscreant had failed to secure the booty, for, mindful of the poor fellow's last injunction, the scout removed his well-filled purse, slung his own rifle over his shoulder, and extinguishing the taper, crept noiselessly and swiftly to the open trap-door.

Swinging himself down, he seized one side of the descending ladder and let himself slide. As he did so, a couple of shots came perilously near to putting an end to his career. He uttered a sharp cry of pain, in the hope of deceiving the miscreant; but he had to deal with a rascal who was as cunning as he was cruel. The latter evidently concluded, by the sounds of the scout's swift descent, that he was still very much alive. He wasted no time in taking further aim in the darkness, but turning on his heel, fled rapidly towards the rear of the saloon.

Anyone but Buffalo Bill would have experienced some difficulty in following the direction of the very faint sounds which the assassin made. As it was, the rascal managed to obtain a good start. Still, Cody was determined at all hazards to get up to him. He followed the other's retreating footsteps past the bar, behind the curtained-off space, into a low, lean-to

shack, which, being dimly illumined by a smoky lamp, revealed the pallid faces of some half a dozen occupants, Cat-Eyed Jim being one of them.

The saloon-keeper made a feeble effort to stay the scout's progress, but Buffalo Bill was not to be baulked.

"Back!" he cried, "or I won't answer for the consequences! Murder has been done! That yellow ruffian has slain Bear Hunter and attempted my life. You know him. I mean to learn the truth. Who is he?"

Buffalo Bill seized Cat-Eyed Jim by the throat and shook him as a terrier would shake a rat.

"I knows him, boss—Fing Fow, the Assassin!"

"Any connection with this show?"

"The powers forbid!"

There was no denying that the man spoke the truth—the cleverest actor could never have assumed such a look of terror as leaped into the saloon-keeper's eyes when Buffalo Bill put that pertinent question.

"I am going to track this rascal down," Cody went on; "and I advise you, my friend, to lie low for a while. I have discovered this—that you are pretty closely connected with the Gila Red Masks. I warn you now, if those rascals give fresh trouble hereabouts you shall be the first to suffer. Communicate at once with Fort Commandant McPhater. Do you understand?"

"I guess so, boss; but for the sake of this yere township don't follow ther White Man's Curse!" implored the crafty wretch, at the same time seeking vainly to restrain his guest.

Hurling him aside, Buffalo Bill dashed out of the shack in time to hear the clatter of a pony's hoofs on the hard ground. Apparently the miscreant, whoever he was, had deemed flight the wisest course. There was no time to be lost. Buffalo Bill laboured under the difficulty of not knowing where his own beast had been corralled, but he was not easily beaten. Giving his familiar call, he was soon rewarded by a neigh of recognition.

The mustang was corralled close at hand. Barely a minute elapsed before Cody had on-saddled and was firmly

planted on the wiry little brute's back. Giving the animal its head, he urged it forward.

Dawn was breaking, and the chances were all in his favour. He spurred after the fugitive, determined at all hazards to sift the mystery to the bottom.

The fugitive soon deviated from the beaten track and, so far as Buffalo Bill could judge, was making for the foothills.

Presently the darkness ahead began to melt beneath the grey shafts of light, but the hitherto invisible ground mist contributed to aid the flying marauder. For a while he was hidden from sight. Suddenly he reappeared, but at a distance so considerable that Buffalo Bill was fairly puzzled to account for the spurt.

Again he vanished, as unaccountably as before; notwithstanding, the sounds of his flight were still audible.

Five, ten minutes elapsed. The grey, cold light of early morning, flushed with the first beams of the rising sun, displayed ahead a rough, undulating plain, neither prairie nor coppice, but embracing features common to each. The ground was getting very rough and Buffalo Bill found it needful to reduce his pace. Clumps of stunted chaparro started up on each hand. A few post-oaks mingled with the hickory and sycamore trees, whilst here and there little knolls and inaccessible bluffs, topped with dark, forbidding-looking cedars, gave a peculiarly desolate touch to the landscape.

Buffalo Bill glanced back in order to take his bearings by the mining settlement, and then, for the first time, he made an important discovery. Silver City was not visible. He took a sweeping glance round and found that the horizon was confined to a space of less than half a mile across. The pursuit had taken him into one of the numerous "blind canals" so frequently encountered on the vast prairies. The discovery made one thing very plain. The fugitive was a good strategist and one who was intimately acquainted with the country.

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Searching the distance ahead, Cody noted that the channel bent to the right, that at the turn the bottom narrowed to little more than a bridle-path, whilst the steep sides were covered thickly with wild clover, wild rye, and tall, tangled clumps of gama grass. It would be impossible to scale the cliffs from there, and since this was the move he contemplated he cast about for a suitable track in the immediate vicinity.

Just where the bend commenced the ground broke away somewhat. This was not easy to detect, since a pine-covered knoll rose abruptly from the base of the channel, and to less practised eyes than Buffalo Bill's it would have escaped notice. Leaping to the ground, he led his mustang by the bridle round to the back of the knoll, where a dried-up water-channel, descending from the higher ground, was distinctly visible.

He had not proceeded half a dozen paces, when something he observed caused him to start eagerly forward and examine the ground more closely. Several hoof-marks were visible. They had been freshly-made and proceeded upward with the course of the channel. The discovery was significant, as well as being another instance of the fugitive's skill and cunning. Below, where he had turned aside, he had covered his tracks with marvellous precision.

With every nerve braced to the excitement of the chase, Buffalo Bill climbed upwards.

It was not a difficult climb, despite the winding nature of the channel, whilst the higher he got the more distinct became the fugitive's tracks. With the utmost caution and with as little noise as possible he gained the crest and found himself on the very edge of a gloomy cedar forest.

The trail wound in and out through one of the deepest groves, and judging by its impression the pursuer concluded that his quarry was not far ahead. Still, though he strove in every conceivable manner to get up with the fugitive, he failed completely.

At length, just about midday,

Buffalo Bill's patience was rewarded by a brief glimpse of the foe. He had dismounted and was watering his mustang when he was suddenly startled by the report of firearms, and simultaneously a shot pierced the brim of his sombrero. The shot had been fired from the depths of a young cypress thicket hard by. Indeed, so close was the attack that Buffalo Bill, when he wheeled about, could distinguish the wreath of blue smoke curling upwards.

Quick as thought he brought his own rifle round and fired at a spot some paces distant. The report was succeeded by a rustling among the underbush, as though the miscreant was again bent on showing a clean pair of heels. Dropping his rifle, Buffalo Bill sprang forward and went crashing into the thicket.

Two or three seconds later he found himself standing on a bend of the same stream where he had been watering his own animal, whilst, scrambling up the opposite bank, mounted on a powerful horse, was Fing Fow, the mysterious Chinaman. The Celestial turned one quick look of mingled hate and malice upon him, fired a parting shot which again pierced the scout's hat, and then, emitting the uncanny, croaking sound with which Buffalo Bill had now become familiar, urged his steed into a mesquite thicket.

It did not take Buffalo Bill long to recover his mustang, then, crossing the stream, he followed in hot pursuit. Mile after mile he kept the fugitive in view. The forest of cedar gave place to the sun-scorched prairie, with its billowy surface and illimitable horizon. To the north ran the low and densely-timbered foot-hills, but, contrary to Buffalo Bill's expectation, the fugitive kept straight ahead.

The afternoon slowly drew to a close. Presently the sun sank behind the level plain-line and the shades of night closed in.

Buffalo Bill was perceptibly gaining, and when darkness finally closed down the fugitive was almost within rifle-range.

Hoppling the mustang, Cody de-

cided to follow up his elusive foe on foot.

Moving stealthily forward and as quickly as his stiff limbs would permit, he presently distinguished the dim outline of a horse and rider. The brute was moving very slowly, but what surprised Cody was the absence of all sound. Yet he had hardly begun to puzzle over this fact when the solution was made patent. It came like a shock. He had left the prairie behind and was striking out across the awful Gila desert!

His own footsteps were inaudible upon the fine, velvety sand. For one brief instant he hesitated, feeling that it would be hazardous to advance. Then a sound from the fugitive—the first he had heard—arrested his attention. Dropping into the sand himself, he peered narrowly ahead and made out the blurred figure of the Celestial. The miscreant had quitted the saddle and seemed to be leading his horse round.

Buffalo Bill felt a thrill of excitement. He had done well in pressing home the chase, for the rascal was bent on doubling back on his tracks. Noiselessly the scout brought his rifle to the shoulder and, aiming at the miscreant's legs, fired.

Almost simultaneously there was another flash, accompanied by a sharp report, as a bullet scored its way along the scout's forehead, inflicting a wound which was within but a hair's breadth of being fatal.

As it was Buffalo Bill rolled over on the ground, stunned.

An hour or so later he recovered to find himself bound hand and foot in the camp of the Gila Red Masks!

CHAPTER 3.

In the Hornets' Nest. — Buffalo Bill's Terrible Ordeal.— A Clever Escape.

"SAY, pards, I guess we orter roast this yer sport," remarked one of the Red Masks, with an oath.

This pleasantry called forth a loud guffaw from the rest, several of whom

came forward and regarded the captive curiously. The man who had first spoken pushed his way through the ring and, with a brutal imprecation, removed his mask.

"Reckon yew an' me ain't strangers, boss," he observed, with an evil grin, as he saw that Buffalo Bill had regained his senses. "We hes met 'way back in Silver City. I opines yew ain't fergot my beauty-marks—yew tuk some powerful notice of 'em 'way back in ther gambling-saloon. I'se Cat-Eyed Jim—that's my handle, ain't it, pards all?"

"It are; an' a cuter crittur never fixed on moccasins!" came the quick response from the bystanders.

"Say, Jim, who does yer fix this yere scout up ter be?" demanded one of the smallest, but evidently the most wiry of the rogues, at the same time bending over the captive and running a deft pair of hands through his pockets, with the result that he soon discovered the well-lined purse of dollar-notes which Buffalo Bill had removed at the request of the dying trapper in the Inferno Saloon.

The appearance of the booty was hailed by a loud shout from the rest; but it was noticeable that no one ventured to dispute the finder's right to place the same in his own belt. Buffalo Bill was slightly puzzled, for amongst the bystanders he made out the burly figure of Ben Lock, who, according to the ill-fated Bear Hunter, was chief of the band.

This miscreant, with a lively recollection of the power Buffalo Bill had exerted over him on the previous occasion, took particular care to avoid the scout's gaze. Cody made a note of the circumstance then. Little did he guess how soon it would be of service to him!

His attention was again directed to Cat-Eyed Jim, who, with one eye fixed intently upon the man who had just removed the dollar-notes, addressed the prisoner.

"Did yer foller thet cussed yaller-belly far, boss?" he asked. "I reckon yer ain't fixed him up yet. Ther boys gambled on it thet Fing Fow would

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put yer under dirt afore he'd done with yer. I guess it was him what laid yer out on the trail where we found yer."

At the mention of the mysterious Chinaman's name the interest of the Red Masks was perceptibly roused, and many questions were put to the scout, which Cat-Eyed Jim took upon himself to answer. He spun a long and exciting yarn about the uncanny Celestial's visit to the "Inferno," winding up with a description of Bear Hunter's fate and Buffalo Bill's departure.

The story roused the keenest interest amongst the masked ruffians, who plied their captive with fresh questions, which he stolidly refused to answer.

Gradually the members of the band resumed their position round the camp-fire, and Cody, helpless and incapable of movement, seemed, for the nonce, forgotten.

The band of ruffians were remarkable for two peculiarities: They studiously refrained from addressing their leader by name and, with the exception of Cat-Eyed Jim, they clung to their ugly masks of red silk.

From where Buffalo Bill lay he could watch them very closely, as well as overhear much that passed. He counted twenty-two ruffians, including Cat-Eyed Jim, Ben Lock, and the dapper little rogue who was unmistakably chief. There was something in the latter's appearance which puzzled the scout, who felt almost certain he had met him somewhere before.

Presently the savoury smell of roast wild turkey was wafted to Cody's nostrils. The ruffians were making a hearty meal off that tasty bird. Would they think of him? he wondered.

Being gagged and incapable of movement, he could only wait and watch. It was an experience far less trying than many another he had undergone, and he was bent on suffering it philosophically, when the chief of the band seemed suddenly to become alive to his proximity.

Quitting the circle by the fire, the

Red Mask leader stole noiselessly to the scout's side and proceeded to remove the latter's gag.

"Hungry?" he said, laconically.

"You would be, were you in my place and had undergone what I have," said Cody.

"Waal, sport scout, I guess ther grub ar' plentiful, an' I ain't aiming ter starve yer. Say, there, one of you boys," he added, raising his voice, "bring ther Buffler food an' drink."

The command was obeyed with alacrity by Cat-Eyed Jim, who seemed inclined to linger, until he was sharply bidden to return to the circle by the fire. Thereupon the masked leader began to feed the scout as he would have fed a child—for Cody, having both his arms secured, was of course incapable of helping himself.

Not a word passed between the two men until the scout's hunger was appeased. Then the Red Mask spoke.

"Are yer open to a deal, Buffler?" he demanded.

"What do you mean?"

"Jest this: these yer boyees air good enough in ther saddle, an' they kin face lead without flinching, but they ain't a brainy crowd. Maybe I'm going ter leave 'em for a bit—on a honeymoon, yer understand—an' I ain't aiming ter find ther hull lot bu'sted up when I shows in ag'in. Now, yew an' me hev pulled ther rope from opposite ends. Suppose we agrees ter drop it an' strike inter partnership? Yew kin boss ther crowd ef yer aims at standing top, an' we shares equal with ther spoil. Now, I reckon that's a fair offer, an' jest think afore yer declines; fer ef yer does yer life ain't worth a mosquito's leg."

The proposal fairly surprised Cody; its audacity staggered him; but he managed to keep his surprise well in check, since it occurred to him that here was the chance to discover the other's real motive—a chance he was not likely to enjoy again, and such a one as could only be embraced by the display of the utmost tact. He temporised.

"Do you mean this seriously?" he asked.

BUFFALO BILL'S TERRIBLE ORDEAL.

"Guess I ain't fooling. Is it 'yes' or 'no'?"

"Well, neither at present. I want to know first why you think me equal to the task of keeping this crowd in hand during your absence. The probable length of your absence is another matter for consideration; so is the kind of security you are prepared to advance for my subsequent safety. Depend on it, I can strike a bargain when I see bottom."

"Waal, pard scout, if yer chucks in yer lot with this yere fool-crowd, I calculate yer kin take care of yerself. There ain't a man in ther hull bunch who gits ther drop on yer fer brains an' grit. Yer ar' jest sizing up my reasons. Waal, they ain't more'n this: I guess I'm aiming ter exterminate Fing Fow, ther white an' red man's cuss. Now, there ain't one o' ther boys what kin face thet terror, an' it's a kind o' slight on ther Red Masks ter hev a durned yaller-belly roaming this yere district a-fooling round ther Red Masks' hunting-grounds. Ef thet terror are cotched, I reckon you are ther sport thet's going ter do it. I'm aiming fer a straight deal. I'm Fifty-four."

He said this in a tone which seemed to imply that he felt his prisoner would be bound to yield. Buffalo Bill merely smiled.

"I imagined as much," he observed, quietly. "And I may as well tell you at once that you are merely wasting breath in forcing this proposal on me. We have met. The advantage is on your side. But the days of you and your band are numbered."

If Buffalo Bill had expected an outburst of ferocity he was disappointed. The miscreant merely regarded him for some moments in silence, then, picking up the gag, he replaced it tightly over Cody's mouth and moved away.

The scout watched him rejoin the ruffians by the fire. He said something and in an instant there was silence. For some time he continued to speak, but in a tone far too low for the prisoner to catch.

Presently the men got up and one by one stole away into the darkness.

All at once the sound of a galloping troop reached the scout's ears. He was conscious of several figures passing to and fro behind him; then, of a sudden, he was seized by two masked ruffians and jerked to his feet. A moment later two others approached and, grasping his nether limbs, bore him, with the assistance of the first couple, past the fire to a precipitous wall of rock. The noosed end of a dangling rope was drawn about his neck and he was hauled a few inches off the ground, which he could just touch with his toes.

Up to this point his face had been turned towards the rock; but, as one of his captors swung him rudely round, a deafening shout, accompanied by the savage war-whoop of the Comanche Indians, directed his thoughts into quite another channel. Facing him, ranged alongside the opposite wall of the fire-lit gully, were the Gila Red Masks, all mounted, and about fifty Comanche warriors, in full war-paint. One only was mounted, and he rode by the side of Fifty-four, the robber chief.

One glance at the redskin ensured his recognition. Buffalo Bill had met him before under conditions vastly different from the present. He was Black Panther, the warrior chief of the Comanches.

"Ugh! the dog of a paleface will take no more Comanche scalps," he said, urging his war-pony suddenly forward, as though to ride the helpless scout down. "Let him know that Black Panther's warriors have danced the scalp-dance, and ere the moon rides at her full the hunting-grounds of the Comanche nation will be red with the blood of the palefaces. The Black Panther has spoken it, and by to-morrow's sun he will come back here to feast his eyes on the dead body of his enemy. His braves will watch the paleface pass to the happy hunting-grounds of the Comanche nation. My brother, the Black Panther is satisfied. My brother has done well."

He wheeled about and grasped the extended hand of the Red Mask chief.

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A moment after the mounted ruffians, with Black Panther at their head, broke into a sharp trot and defiled past the helpless and half-strangled scout.

The succeeding minutes were not pleasant ones for the mortified captive, who, surrounded by the fifty Comanche warriors left behind, was subjected to every indignity short of actual bodily harm which their ingenuity could devise.

Suddenly the magic word "Fire-water" passed from mouth to mouth, and the warriors made a rush for the robbers' commissariat, leaving their victim to his own reflections. That he was doomed to a horribly lingering death Buffalo Bill could not help but perceive. Fifty-four, in stringing his prisoner up a few inches above the ground, had given a fresh instance of his sardonic cruelty, since it was possible for Buffalo Bill to avoid strangulation so long as his strength enabled him to poise his weight by touching the ground with the tips of his toes.

Full well did Cody know that this effort could not be sustained long. Already his feet and legs were aching under the dreadful strain, and whenever he attempted to shift his weight from one foot to the other the noose about his neck tightened with a vicious jerk. He was in no condition to take particular note of his surroundings, consequently, when his ears detected a movement close by, he prepared himself to endure further indignities at the hands of the gloating, and now possibly drunken, warriors.

"This time, Sport Buffler, I guess I've got the laugh on yew!"

The words hissed into his ear caused him to start with surprise, with the result that for the succeeding minute he endured unspeakable agony, caused by the noose cutting into his neck. Turning his head slowly, he met the mocking gaze of Ben Lock.

"I reckon, Buffler, yew hes heard the old maxim—'dead men tell no tales.' Waal, I guess it's thet way with yew; so I kind o' reckon yew an' me kin hev a safe pow-wow. Now, then, I'se goin' ter tell yer a secret, an' yer kin fix it on ther tablets o' yer

memory when yer crosses ther Divide, which yer will do some soon. Them Ccmanches aims ter-night ter play the razzle-dazzle with ther West Valley Ranch. Black Panther air jist b'ilin' over ter take Nellie Probyn — yer knows her, I guess—for his squaw, an' it are her what Fifty-four are gone sweet on, too. Fifty-four reckons ter git ther gal an' leave Black Panther and his red varmints ter put up a losing fight with the Phoenix Fort crowd."

So saying, the ruffian gave a low, gleeful chuckle, and leered horribly at his helpless victim, whose agony of mind was tenfold increased by these disclosures. The miscreant had indeed secured the upper hand, and Buffalo Bill thought bitterly of his helpless plight; but the full horror of his position was yet to dawn on him.

His tormentor had stepped a few paces backward, and having thrown a rapid glance in the direction of the carousing redskins, raised his rifle slowly to a level with the scout's head. He did not, however, fire, but running the barrel lightly over Buffalo Bill's shoulder, and thereby disturbing the latter's equipoise, he nosed the end into a crevice in the rock behind. For almost a minute he was thus engaged, while Buffalo Bill swayed to and fro, gasping for breath, and struggling in vain to loosen that awful noose, which was slowly but surely choking the life out of him.

For how long this dreadful agony continued, he had no means of ascertaining. His senses were slipping away, and he had but a confused impression of what followed, until he found himself, to his intense surprise, supported in the arms of his tormentor. He was able to breathe freely again. The intense relief of those few moments was only to be compared to the agony of the preceding ones.

What this new move on Ben Lock's part might portend, he little guessed. That his enemy was inspired by feelings the reverse of good will he knew. Very deliberately the Red Mask swung his victim round, until the latter faced the perpendicular wall of rock.

Still dazed, some minutes elapsed ere Buffalo Bill could sufficiently recover his faculties to take note of his surroundings. Suddenly he made an appalling discovery. The fire-glow lighting up the face of the rock revealed a long, narrow crevice level with his head. As he ran his eye along this slight aperture, a strange feeling of dread assailed him. What could it portend? His enemy had taken a few rapid steps backward, and was watching him.

Keeping his gaze fixed upon the crevice in the rock wall, Buffalo Bill became sensible of a slight movement there. A horrible fascination held him motionless, whilst the movement continued, until gradually there resolved itself from the depths of the crevice the diamond-shaped head of a rattler!

The reptile slowly arranged itself to strike. Buffalo Bill could hear its rattle working with horrible distinctness. Its basilisk-like gaze produced a strange effect upon him, for he felt perfectly incapable of movement; his limbs became rigid, and for a while he was quite lost to the horrible nature of his surroundings.

Slowly, indeed almost imperceptibly, the reptile raised its head to a level with Buffalo Bill's eyes, its rattles going faster and faster as it prepared to strike. How long this state of suspense lasted the helpless scout could never tell. All at once the hideous serpent darted forth, its scaly head glistening in the fire-glow, with its horrible fangs distended.

Simultaneously the spell was broken which had held Buffalo Bill motionless. Regardless of the consequences, he drew himself violently backward as the reptile struck, and thus avoided being bitten. But he was conscious of a dull, agonising pain in the head and throat, succeeded by a brief period of unconsciousness.

When his benumbed faculties recovered themselves, he found the rattler on the very edge of the crevice preparing to strike again. But he had hardly made this discovery when he felt the strings holding the gag to his mouth cut from behind.

"I guess, Butler, the more yer squawk the more them red varmints will enjoy this yere circus," said Ben Lock, with a brutal laugh. "They ain't heard yer yet, but when they does, even the fire-water won't keep 'em back; they'll swarm round like a bunch o' wild mustangs ter see ther fun. I was aiming ter surprise yer, an' I guess I've done it. There's more'n one rattler inside thet hole; they'll fix yer up jest nicely presently."

For a moment the ruffian's diabolical cruelty appalled Buffalo Bill, but the exigencies of the occasion allowed him no time to speculate upon how far the Red Mask would go before the agonising end came.

Little did Ben Lock dream when he removed the victim's gag that he was in reality sealing his own doom. Even Buffalo Bill failed to recognise at first the immense advantage which his enemy had given him, his whole attention being centred on the angry reptile.

In vain the scout struggled against the fascination of the horrible serpent. From whichever angle his head assumed, its beady eyes were still rivetted upon his own. In vain he fought against a dreadful feeling of drowsiness, an indescribable sense of dread, shrinking from the coming stroke, yet longing for the suspense to be ended.

Presently other rattles sounded within the crevice, and then another and another diamond-shaped head protruded and began, with horrifying regularity, to keep pace with the movements of the first.

For some minutes the reptiles continued to swing to and fro, until at last Ben Lock's patience gave out. With an oath he stepped forward, intending to swing Buffalo Bill into the very jaws of the reptiles, but the movement was ill-timed. One of the snakes, with an angry hiss, struck at him. A howl of pain and terror burst from the miscreant, who leaped back, but too late to save himself from the coils of the rattler. The snake's fangs had entered his wrist, and the miscreant, in

drawing suddenly back, had merely drawn the deadly reptile with him.

Trembling with horror and dread, the Red Mask shook the serpent to the ground, and, quick as thought, smashed its head with the butt-end of his rifle. In his anxiety to despatch the snake, he lurched against the suspended scout and swung him round.

It was little less than a miracle that enabled Buffalo Bill to retain his foothold on the ground. But he contrived to do so, and though for a moment the noose round his neck tightened, the succeeding moment brought it slack, and thus enabled him not only to breathe freely, but to take a rapid survey of his surroundings.

Round the camp-fire some thirty Comanche warriors were still carousing; others, overpowered by the intoxicating fire-water, were lying in various attitudes in a heavy, drunken stupor. The redskins were too occupied to attend to him, or to pay any heed to the noisy movements of the Red Mask. Behind came increased sounds of rattling and hissing, indicating that the whole brood of deadly reptiles was now thoroughly roused.

At any moment they might strike, and then, situated as Buffalo Bill was, no power on earth could save him from death. The thought was maddening. Already his tormentor was writhing on the ground in the first agony of delirium. The ruffian had apparently forgotten the presence of his victim, for he was howling and moaning by turn, hugging his injured wrist in a state of frenzy.

Buffalo Bill called to him by name, and with an oath he sprang up. There was murder in his eyes when they met the clear, steady gaze of the scout. His hand went instinctively to the knife in his belt, and, with a savage imprecation, he drew it out and made a mad rush for his victim. But, as on a former occasion, the ruffian's murderous impulse was arrested, and he quailed before the suspended scout's still masterful gaze.

"Cut these cords asunder, and I'll do what I can to save you," said Buffalo Bill quietly.

"I have the Pawnee Indians' cure for snakebites," he continued, "but it must be applied at once, or as sure as there is a Heaven above you are doomed."

"Curse you!" snarled the ruffian, striking forward.

But the blow, as Buffalo Bill full well knew, was not aimed at himself but at the rope above which had held him suspended so long. One cut of the knife severed the line, and Cody dropped sideways.

"Quick! unfasten my hands, if you would be saved!" he said, in the same commanding tone.

His manner completely mastered the ruffian and made him as obedient as a child. He not only released his victim's hands but the thongs about his ankles as well. Then Buffalo Bill dragged himself slowly and painfully from that fatal spot. His limbs were horribly stiff and numbed, and the slightest movement caused him excruciating agony.

Ben Lock followed him like a whipped cur—a cur might possibly have displayed more courage than this cowardly miscreant, who began to whimper and implore his victim to save him. His misery, however, went to the generous scout's heart, and, at the cost of no little pain to himself, Cody produced from an inner pocket a little metal box, containing the Indian salve, which he next applied to the tiny puncture on the scoundrel's wrist.

The effect was instantaneous so far as the Red Mask's sufferings were concerned. The agonising pain ceased, and the wound began to discharge. Completely awed, he sat and watched the scout replace the salve.

Nor was Buffalo Bill in any hurry to disturb him, since a short period of rest was absolutely necessary to ensure the complete use of his limbs. Moreover, he had no intention of allowing the fellow to get away.

Five, ten, fifteen minutes passed, and Ben Lock began to fidget. He was unpleasantly aware of the absolute control Buffalo Bill held over him, but being unable to account for it, like all men of his stamp, he began to re-

THE ATTACK ON THE RANCH.

gard the scout with superstitious horror.

At last Buffalo Bill got up, and the Red Mask would have followed but for a stern command to remain where he was. He watched his late prisoner move cautiously and noiselessly to the spot where several drunken Comanches lay in a huddled, helpless heap.

Buffalo Bill was not long absent. He returned with a coil of seasoned hide, which, taking the miscreant's own knife, he proceeded to cut into several strips. This done, he turned his eyes again on to the wondering and fearsome ruffian.

"Lie down!" he said, in a tone that brooked no refusal.

Ben Lock obeyed reluctantly. He partly guessed what was coming, but he found it impossible to resist the scout's superior will. He remained absolutely passive whilst Buffalo Bill secured his ankles and wrists, but he offered a feeble objection to being gagged.

Having satisfied himself that, so far, his movements had been unobserved, Buffalo Bill proceeded to annex the miscreant's brace of revolvers, his rifle and bowie, together with a complete outfit of ammunition.

"Now, my friend," he said, bending over and addressing the helpless rogue, "you may tell Black Panther, if he returns, that William Cody intends to rub him out. As for Fifty-four, it may please you to know that, thanks to your timely volubility, his pleasant little plan will be nipped in the bud. I, too, am bound for the West Valley Ranch."

CHAPTER 4.

The Attack on the Ranch.—A Forlorn Hope.—The Explosion.

"Hist! open to a friend. Quick! there is danger without."

These words, spoken in a quick undertone, made several inmates of the West Valley Ranch start with surprise, not unaccompanied by alarm. For three days they had held the ranch against Black Panther's fierce hordes, with the certain knowledge that the Comanches were leagued to

that gang of cutthroats, the Gila Red Masks; and now, two hours after sunset on the third day, this mysterious voice struck upon their ears from without.

"Who speaks?" demanded Sidney Probyn, the owner of the building.

"William Cody, Chief of Scouts," came the response.

It was indeed the daring scout, as the inmates soon discovered, when, with all necessary caution the door was opened to admit him. Buffalo Bill heaved a sigh of relief and scanned each face narrowly. There was only one he recognised, and that one a girl merging into womanhood. She was undoubtedly lovely, though hardly looking at her best as with pallid cheeks and dishevelled hair she faced him with the rest. By her side stood a tall, handsome man, whose age might be anywhere between twenty-five and thirty. He had been wounded in the head, which was bandaged tightly round and over the forehead. Grouped about these central figures were some half a dozen ranch hands, hard-riding "cow-punchers," who looked as capable of sighting a rifle as throwing a lariat. They were all hard fighters, and composed the remnants of the West Valley Ranch "outfit." The "boss" spoke.

"I have heard of you, Colonel Cody, and must say that you have come at an opportune moment. I doubt much, unless you can devise some new plan, whether we shall be able to hold the ranch till daybreak. We have suffered severely these last three days; more than half our present number have paid in their cheques, and it looks as if we are bound the same way pretty soon. I have sent to the Fort Phoenix for assistance. Our messengers have probably been slain, for assistance is not forthcoming."

It was not difficult to note the undercurrent of despair in the young ranch-owner's breast. Buffalo Bill advanced and shook him warmly by the hand, and turned with a bow and a smile to the young girl in whom he recognised Nell Probyn. There was no mistaking her relationship to the handsome young giant by her side.

Anyone could see they were brother and sister.

"Tell us how you gained the ranch," said Miss Probyn, "and whether you deem escape to Fort Phoenix, under cover of the night, possible."

"I will offer my opinion on the latter subject first," replied Buffalo Bill. "Escape is impracticable. Fully three hundred Comanche warriors surround the ranch, not to speak of two score outlaws and their remorseless chief, the runaway convict, Fifty-four. They have a particular object in seeking to destroy this place."

"Yet, durn their or'nary hides, I guess we means ter fight till we die, and then if we don't rise again and fight on from across the Divide, my handle ain't Bill Martin," broke in one of the cowboys with an oath.

A chorus of assent came from the rest, and Buffalo Bill perceived at a glance that one and all were alive to the real motive of their assailants. Indeed, as he subsequently learned, Black Panther, the Comanche chief, had offered to spare the ranch and its inmates, subject to the production of Nell, whom he vowed should become his squaw.

"Well, escape, I fear, being out of the question, we must do the best to hold out till aid comes from the fort. I have been three days and nights hiding inside the Comanche lines. To-night I succeeded in getting away; but, as ill-luck would have it, the redskins picked up my trail, and, if I mistake not, they are preparing for a general assault now."

As if to lend emphasis to Buffalo Bill's warning, a fierce onslaught at that very moment was made upon the door. A dozen powerful Comanches were striving with their tomahawks to break through, whilst simultaneously an attack was made upon the barricaded windows, as well as along the whole rear of the building.

"We're in for it, boys; it's neck or nothing. Keep the red devils at bay till the last shot's spent, and then we'll send the shanty sky-high. If that doesn't stagger them, I'm no judge of red trash," cried Sidney Probyn, himself suiting the action to

the word by putting a bullet through the skull of one of the yelling warriors.

Meanwhile, the gallant but slender little band of defenders had scattered themselves about the building in a hopeless attempt to keep the fierce foe at bay. Buffalo Bill would have joined them on the instant, but he was restrained by a gentle hold on his arm. It was Nell, and her look was so pitiable, so pleading, that when she beckoned him into a little square room, originally an office, in the very middle of the building, he was constrained to lower his rifle and follow her.

The room was lighted by a lamp hanging from the ceiling directly over an open trapdoor in the floor. Evidently there was a passage-way beneath, for preparations for flight were visible to the scout's practised eye. The girl closed the door, and stepped hurriedly to his side.

"Mr. Cody," she said, "I have learnt that it is not really Black Panther who wants me, but that villain chief of the Gila Red Masks, who is known as Fifty-four. The redskin chief is only acting as his tool."

"You are mistaken, Miss Probyn. They both want you, and I verily believe are prepared to fight with each other for possession."

"What do you mean?" cried the girl, with flaming cheeks.

"Just this: I have reasons for saying that Black Panther is not acting as the other's cat's-paw, but should you be so unfortunate as to fall into his hands, Fifty-four will assuredly attempt to wrest you from him, leaving the Comanches to bear the blame of your capture. In fact, the Red Mask's plans are so arranged."

The girl listened, with a look of dawning horror in her eyes.

"What can I do?" she faltered.

"Much. Tell me, first, is there a means of quitting the ranch?"

"This passage beneath leads to a timber motte beyond the horse-corral. My brother meant to use it as a last resource, for the motte is held by the Indians."

THE EXPLOSION.

The scout waited to hear no more. Bidding the girl remain by the trap-door, he hastened into the outer room, where Sidney Probyn and two of his men were holding the Indians at bay. The Comanches had succeeded in battering down the upper portion of the door.

"This place is doomed!" said Cody, speaking in a quick undertone to the ranch-owner. "Moreover, the men are worn out, and the sooner you beat a retreat the better. Get one of the men to call in their comrades from the back."

This plan being promptly acted upon, the little band of defenders fell back upon the room where Nell had waited in a state of fearful suspense. Buffalo Bill was concerned to note how the late engagement had thinned the "outfit" by the loss of two more lives. But he had little time to question the survivors, since the Comanches bore the barricade down with a crash and rushed yelling into the doomed building. There was no time to lose. Nell led the way through the open trap in the floor, being immediately followed by the scout, whilst Sidney Probyn came last.

Below and almost directly under the open trap, a quantity of gunpowder was stored. To this had been fixed a time-fuse, which the young rancher proceeded to light, whilst Nell and the rest made with all possible haste along the subterranean passage. They were speedily joined by Sidney Probyn.

"I don't think those gentry who are storming the old ranch will give much trouble presently," he said, with a grim laugh. "It's a desperate remedy, for I lose everything; but I imagine it will put a quietus to fully fifty red fiends."

"The chances are that we, too, may suffer unless the whole force of the explosion is directed upwards," objected Buffalo Bill.

"I never thought of that. Quick! quick!" exclaimed Probyn, roused to a full sense of the threatening danger.

Nell, who bore a small guy-lamp, pressed ahead at a speed which the weary men found hard to equal.

Buffalo Bill found it necessary to assist one of them along, and then he imperceptibly fell back to the rear.

"Hark, colonel! What is that?" the young rancher exclaimed suddenly, laying a convulsive grasp upon the scout's arm.

They were in complete darkness, for Nell had turned an angle in the passage ahead, being consequently hidden from view. The sound resembled very nearly a scream of mortal agony, but since it was immediately succeeded by the appalling roar of the explosion, it was beyond even Buffalo Bill's capacity to judge by the first sound what had happened or what it might portend.

At the same moment as the roar of the explosion broke upon their ears the ground seemed to heave upwards, and in the succeeding brief interval of silence the first cry was repeated. A woman's shrill, piercing shriek rang through the passage.

"Great powers! Cody, that's my sister! Something has happened!" gasped the rancher.

What the scout's response might have been his companion had no means of learning. The roof of the passage was caving in! Simultaneously Buffalo Bill was hurled against the opposite wall, whilst from the man he had been assisting there broke one smothered gasp of agony as the ceiling crashed down on top of him.

Not for one single moment did Buffalo Bill lose his presence of mind. No matter what might be happening ahead, their only chance lay in pressing forward. Probyn was lying bruised and helpless by his side. He pulled him up, and to his intense relief found that he had suffered no broken bones.

"For the love of Heaven, leave me and save her!" groaned the young man.

"Come, man—come at once! Things may not be as bad as that," urged the scout, at the same time partly dragging, partly leading his companion on.

Probyn offered no further objection; but he soon found that their attempt to get quit of the passage was not so easy as he had anticipated. Masses

of loose earth blocked the way, and at last, when these obstacles were surmounted and they approached the passage end, a dense cloud of smoke threatened to suffocate them.

Still they pressed on, only to be beaten back by that suffocating barrier. They were trapped!

CHAPTER 5.

Through Fire and Smoke. — Black Panther Sues for Peace.—The End of Fifty-four.

QUICK to recognise the gravity of the situation, Buffalo Bill saw that the remedy must be an heroic one.

"Possibly the very worst has happened," he said. "We had better take our chances with the redskins than suffer a slow but certain death in this hole."

Probyn, whose thoughts were centred upon his sister's probable fate, readily fell in with the scout's proposal. Their preparations were few and quickly made. Removing their neck-cloths and fastening them securely over nose and mouth, with rifles tightly grasped, they nerved themselves for the rush through that dreadful pall of smoke. Then, when all was ready, Buffalo Bill gave the signal and together they dashed forward. As they neared the outlet they were assailed by a gust of heat that almost drove them back.

With every nerve throbbing they put forth their remaining strength and dashed from the smoke-laden passage into a veritable furnace.

The timber motte was afire. The trunks and limbs of pines, post-oak, and cedar were wreathed in tongues of flame, whilst in parts, where the underbrush was not already consumed, vast sheets of flame shot upwards through the rolling clouds of smoke. To linger meant death sure and terrible, yet all possible means of escape seemed cut off.

Buffalo Bill took one swift glance round. By the mouth of the passage he observed a still smouldering heap of damp grass. Hard by lay the body of one of the cowboys, the poor fellow's nether limbs being already consumed

by the flames. The fire had not yet reached his face, but an ugly gash in his throat showed how the end had come.

There was one thing about the body which Buffalo Bill noted, even under those awful conditions—the scalp had not been touched! The discovery was significant; if it meant anything, it meant that the Comanches had not fired the motte. The work had been done by the Gila Red Masks. In an instant there seemed to rise before the scout's eye the whole horrible details. The flying girl and her three companions must have been set upon by Fifty-four and his masked fiends; then, having effected their purpose, they had fired the motte and were now probably riding hard across the prairie with their helpless captive.

Plucking Probyn by the arm, Buffalo Bill pointed to a spot where the underbrush, though aflame, was not yet wholly consumed. There, and there only, was flight possible.

The young rancher seemed to understand, and without another instant's delay Buffalo Bill rushed through a blazing grove of trees and literally flung himself into the fast-burning underbrush. Torn, bleeding, and burned, he dragged himself through, followed quickly by his companion.

Another wave of flame and smoke seemed to rise up in front, but the ever-shifting glow revealed upon the further side a crowd of Comanche warriors. That the scout had been noticed a fierce, vengeful yell too plainly showed. Still, there was no help for it. Better fall into the hands of his savage foes than linger and be burned alive.

With left hand upraised to beat back the flame and smoke from his smarting face, the daring scout took his final plunge through the barrier of fire. His quick ear detected above the roar of the fire behind the sharp twanging of bows and arrows ahead. Instantly several of these feathered missiles flew past.

He was in the very act of clearing the ring of fire, when a subdued groan, followed by the sound of a heavy fall

behind, told him that his companion had been struck. With a rare courage and devotion, Buffalo Bill swung round to his comrade's assistance.

Sidney Probyn had fallen face forward in a patch of blazing underbrush and was struggling vainly to rise. An arrow had pierced his throat, but the fall having broken the shaft off, rendered the act of removing the barbed head impossible. He was doomed, and that he recognised the inevitable Buffalo Bill was soon to learn. As the brave scout bent over and picked him up, he whispered:

"Cody, I'm done for. Leave me here, but save her. Promise—promise to save Nell. I know what has happened. She has been abducted by that fiend Fifty-four. I suspected from the first that he was at the bottom of all this mischief. Save her, Cody, and if a dying man's blessing is of any service, you have mine!"

"I'll pick up her trail at once, if it please Providence," was the scout's quick answer as, regardless of the other's wish to leave him where he had fallen, he raised him up and, slinging his limp body over one shoulder, plunged once more into the sea of flame.

Burned, blackened, and exhausted, Buffalo Bill dragged himself through with his dying burden, to be faced by a semicircle of awed and wondering braves. The daring scout's act of gallantry had not passed unnoticed by those fierce red men.

Staggering some paces from the fire, Buffalo Bill dropped his burden. Instantly an appalling yell burst from the redskin ranks. They recognised him. Quick as thought he unslung his rifle and faced them.

Their numbers were increasing momentarily, and suddenly Buffalo Bill espied his old enemy, Black Panther, making for him. The Comanche chief uttered a fierce war-whoop, as, bounding from the midst of his braves, he leaped at the daring scout with tomahawk and scalping-knife flashing in the fire-glow.

Buffalo Bill rapidly thought out a plan of action. Quickly he brought his

rifle to the shoulder and covered the on-coming savage chief.

"Let Black Panther fall back, or his paleface enemy will put a bullet through his heart," he said, in a voice loud enough for all to hear.

The Comanche stopped short about half a dozen paces from the desperate scout. At the same moment the latter lowered his weapon. The time to put his plan into execution had arrived.

"Black Panther is a brave foe; why, then, has he acted like a coward?" the scout cried; and, not giving the other time to respond, continued: "Listen! Black Panther has taken the war-path with the Gila Red Masks. He has done foolishly, for the Red Masks have betrayed him. Let Black Panther ask his warriors where the bad palefaces are now. Let him produce one of them here, and his paleface enemy will speak no more. He cannot, for the Red Masks have fooled him. They have taken the paleface maiden, and are racing across the prairie to their stronghold. Black Panther has lost many braves; West Valley Ranch is destroyed to no purpose. Let Black Panther speak!"

"If the paleface speaks with a crooked tongue, he shall die; if his words are true, Black Panther will kill the Red Masks."

So saying, the now thoroughly startled Comanche made a signal to his warriors, and in a trice Buffalo Bill was surrounded. Resistance, even had he been capable of adopting it, was useless. But he motioned his captors aside as he bent over the ill-fated rancher, only to find that, so far as Sidney Probyn was concerned, his worst fears had been realised—the poor fellow's spirit had fled!

Black Panther lost no time in ascertaining from his warriors that the outlaws had deserted them. His prisoner's statement was confirmed. The Red Masks to a man had taken their departure. The Comanche chief received the news in grim silence. Crossing over to his prisoner, he ordered the latter's release, and held out his hand.

"Does Black Panther seek peace or war?" demanded Buffalo Bill.

"Black Panther would smoke the pipe of peace with his paleface enemy. He seeks the bad palefaces; his warriors shall rub them out. His heart is sad, for many of his braves are slain. For many moons the Comanche nation has fought with the bad palefaces against the children of their Great White Father. This night we bury the hatchet. The enemies of the paleface chief shall become the enemies of the Comanche nation. Harken, my warriors! Black Panther has spoken; it is well."

As the chief brought his peroration to a finish Buffalo Bill surveyed the circle of war-bedecked braves with secret anxiety. So far his plan had succeeded, but its outcome depended largely on whether or not any discordant note was manifest. There followed a brief interval of silence, broken by a distant yell of warning, to be succeeded by another and another, until, in a few minutes, the utmost confusion prevailed.

The cause was soon apparent. A large force of cavalry was seen approaching. Buffalo Bill's heart sank within him. Already Black Panther was regarding him with a fierce scowl, and some of the warriors nearest had raised their tomahawks, anticipating their leader's orders to strike. None but Cody could have faced that critical moment and turned the tide of angry suspicion as he did.

"If Black Panther would seek peace let him help the paleface now and peace shall be maintained. Let him draw back his braves and give the paleface a mustang. The paleface will ride forward and stop his nation's warriors," he said.

To his intense relief he found Black Panther equally alive to the urgency of the case, and quite as anxious to avoid a hostile meeting. His own war-pony being close at hand, he promptly offered it to the scout, who, swinging himself on to its back, urged the fiery little brute headlong through the excited crowd of warriors.

Making frantic signals, Cody soon met an advanced body of troopers. Colonel McPhater was in command, and Cody staggered towards him.

"Colonel, for the love of Heaven, call your men off! Don't attack; the Comanches sue for peace!" he cried.

"Who are you? Speak man! My life, it's Cody!" exclaimed the commandant.

"Cody, by all that's marvellous, how come you here, and in this state, too?" he asked.

As well as he could Buffalo Bill gave a brief account of the night's incidents, winding up by emphasising Black Panther's willingness to smoke the pipe of peace, and advising a pow-wow with him and his head warriors.

"As you will, Cody—as you will; only these cutthroat rascals, the Red Masks, must not be allowed to escape."

The colonel called his officers together and held a hurried council-of-war. It was an anxious time for Buffalo Bill, but his counsels prevailed; and ere the break of day a formal peace had been concluded with the fierce warriors of the Comanche nation.

Nevertheless, Colonel McPhater was forced, much against his will, to concede a point in Black Panther's favour. The latter insisted on at once following up the trail of his treacherous ally, threatening, in the event of the colonel's refusal, to take the war-path again. He gained his point, and so by the first blush of dawn most of the Comanche braves had filed silently away from the scene of their defeat.

* * * *

It was midday when Buffalo Bill, after a short and much-needed rest, wearing the uniform of the 5th Cavalry and mounted on one of the troopers' horses, waved his sombrero in parting salute to the commandant and his staff. Bearing in mind his promise made to the dying rancher to rescue Nell, he was taking the trail alone. The cavalry would be following, but of necessity their movements would be slow.

The outlaws' stronghold being situated at the extreme western limit of the foothills, Buffalo Bill reckoned that by crossing an angle of the Gila desert he might outdistance the Comanches and come upon the Gila Red Masks

ahead of the vengeful redskins. Moreover, he was curious to revisit the scene of his futile struggle with the elusive Celestial.

Even Fifty-four, the rascally chief of the Red Masks, had confessed himself baffled by the Chinaman. Up to then Buffalo Bill had entertained a suspicion that the outlaw chief knew more of the horrible Celestial than he cared to admit even to his band. It seemed as if he would have to seek some other solution—if, indeed, he should succeed at all in getting to the bottom of the mystery.

He struck the edge of the desert by sundown, and with a lively recollection of his earlier experience, he decided to camp there for the night. By sunrise he was in the saddle once more, and for some hours plodded over that burning, waterless waste.

The sun slowly climbed to the zenith; the heat was well-nigh unbearable. But there was nothing for it but to press ahead at the best pace the horse could muster. Owing in part to the fierce glare of the sun and the quivering heat waves, the horizon seemed limited to a few miles.

The afternoon was drawing to a close when a gasp of relief broke from Buffalo Bill. His jaded steed seemed to understand that the worst of the journey was over, for the brute's pace quickened perceptibly. Presently little tufts of coarse grass broke the monotony of the sandy waste. The ground became firmer, and at last the edge of the desert was crossed.

Ahead rose the foot-hills, and far in the distance a line of dark timber; but the object that attracted Buffalo Bill's immediate attention was a path of swamp prairie lying in a deep hollow to the left. Water was the first thing needful both for himself and the horse, and though to obtain it he would have to deviate from the trail, the call of Nature could not be denied.

Turning the horse's head in the direction of the swamp, he had little need to urge the tired brute on. The animal smelt the water, and seemed galvanised into fresh life.

At last the moist, grassy bottom was reached, and with a sigh of relief Buf-

falo Bill dismounted. The swamp prairie lay still some half a mile off, spreading out roughly in the form of a triangle, being covered densely in parts with a luxuriant tangle of weeds, wild vines, and cottonwoods.

Leading the horse carefully across the soft, spongy ground, Buffalo Bill made his way to the water-side, and having quenched his own thirst, allowed the brute to do the same. Then, staking the animal, the scout proceeded to refresh himself with some of the provisions he had brought along. The meal was hastily eaten, for he was anxious to get clear of the swamp before sundown.

* * * * *

"Hands up, or I fire!"

Cody spoke, and the red-masked villain who had been standing guard outside the narrow ravine since break of day wheeled about in utter confusion, to find himself completely at the mercy of the redoubtable scout.

By utilising the few hours of moonlight, Buffalo Bill had succeeded in approaching the outlaws' stronghold in advance of the Comanches. The place was admirably adapted for the use to which it had been put, being a "pocket," or valley, set in the heart of an unscalable ridge of bare hills, the entrance being through a narrow ravine, which could be held successfully against overwhelming numbers. Cody had stake-roped his horse some distance away and contrived, under cover of the dark, to enter the ravine unnoticed by the sentinel. But knowing it would be little short of madness to attempt the passage without a guide, he had decided to wait until daybreak and force the sentinel to lead the way.

"Hands up!" he repeated, confronting the masked rogue with his six-shooter.

It being futile to resist, the outlaw obeyed sullenly.

"You know me?"

"I guess so, pard scout, but I reckon yew has struck a hornets' nest this time!"

"Not so fast, my friend. Come nearer. I have something for your

ear alone," the scout said quietly but sternly.

The few words which Buffalo Bill whispered into his ear were attended by a remarkable effect. He started back, wearing a look of unmistakable amazement and horror.

"It can't be!" he objected hoarsely.

"What if I am prepared to stake my life to prove it true? Come, man, if I fail, I am completely at the mercy of your band. Lead the way. I'm ready."

Throwing down his arms in obedience to the scout's command, the ruffian turned and moved up the ravine. A little distance further on another sentinel barred the way. Seeing his comrade at the mercy of the scout, he would have raised the alarm had not the first ruffian silenced him by a few words spoken in a hurried undertone. He, too, displayed signs of startled amazement.

"Come," said Buffalo Bill impatiently, "there is no time to lose if you wish to save your scalps. The Comanches have vowed to rub you all out, and your lives depend on my being able to produce your villainous leader."

The other yielded, and together they led Buffalo Bill by devious passages into a large, rocky hollow, where some twenty other rogues, all masked, were partaking ravenously of breakfast.

Ben Lock was there. His face went ashen when he recognised the scout; next instant his hand sought the revolver at his belt; but the first sentinel approached him and said something in a whisper.

"Is this true? Can you prove it?" he demanded hoarsely of Buffalo Bill.

"Show me your master and you shall see," was the scout's quick response. "But first there is one thing I wish to know. Has this villainous leader of yours brought Miss Probyn here?"

Ben Lock shook his head.

"Ther boss got pretty lively mauled by Edgemount's troop, an' ther gal were reskied by them boys in blue. He ain't long come in, neither, an' I guess he ain't fit ter drop a coyote jest now. Waal, I ain't aiming ter

baulk yer this time, Buffler, so walk in here and show the varmint up."

So saying he threw open the door of a large shed, but as Buffalo Bill stepped over the threshold a shot rang out. Instantly the scout's own weapon spoke and the chief of the outlaws sank back into a seat with a snarl and a groan.

"Look here, you deluded fools," said Buffalo Bill, turning and addressing the men, "this is the man you have obeyed and owned as chief these many years. Now do you recognise him, now that the mask is torn from his face? Behold, one and all, Fing Fow, the white and red man's curse!"

So saying, Buffalo Bill tore the grisly red mask from the miscreant's face—the mask which the horrified bystanders had never seen removed. Then the bushy beard and whiskers worn by the Celestial to maintain the character he impersonated dropped away, and the yellow, evil face of the Chinaman was exposed to all.

The wretch was incapable of resisting the furious rush of his deluded band. With cries of rage and hate they fell upon him. But their vengeance was only half-complete, for, warned by the scout of the Comanches' approach, the band of outlaws, panic-stricken, fled from their stronghold, leaving Buffalo Bill to explain matters to Black Panther, and subsequently to Colonel McPhater, when the latter, with his soldiers, came up.

As to Nell Probyn, she had indeed been rescued by a troop of regulars under Captain Walter Edgemount, and the reader will perhaps be interested to learn that not long afterwards she married that gallant officer.

THE END.

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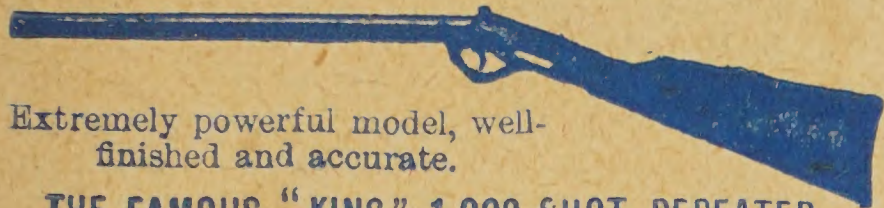
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